

February 4, 1871.

OUR NATIONAL DEFENCES.



THE results of the campaign on the Continent, and the overthrow, in a period unprecedented in history, of a great nation—a nation which has hitherto been considered the first military power in the world—have made an impression on the minds of Englishmen which is far from comfortable, to say the least of it. We have hitherto held the first place amongst the nations. With pardonable pride, we remember our former and our present greatness; and we have no wish, in the rapid and sudden contingencies of the present time, to lose our ancient sovereignty amongst the nations, and, through any apathy or want of foresight on our own parts, to sink to the position of a second or third rate power. The ambition of kings is, at the present moment, at fever heat. The din of arms rings too ominously around us for us to remain quiet and self-satisfied lookers-on at the fierce storm of blood which eddies round us so tumultuously day by day, with merciless lack of abatement.

We naturally turn to one another and ask the question—How should we ourselves stand, if rudely forced into conflict with any nation which might think itself strong enough to attack us? Are we prepared for war? And the answer is an uneasy negative.

Lord Bacon, England's greatest philosopher, has said:—"Let it suffice that no estate expect to be great that is not awake upon any just occasion of arming." True words these, indeed, though spoken more than two centuries ago! And never did they apply more truly than to the state of England at the present time. And, in speaking of England, we do not mean only this little island of ours—begirt by nature's belt of blue ocean—but the dominions all over the world which own us master, and of which the loss of even the smallest by foreign attack would lower our prestige immediately among the nations of the world. Our interests in Asia and America are alike assailable; Russia has an eye to India, and to wrest that jewel from our crown has long been her traditional policy; America looks to Canada and the West Indian Islands with a longing which our obstinacy with regard to the Alabama claims has not failed, certainly, to diminish;—until, as we look round us on every side, a universal conclusion has been come to that the naval and military power which sufficed in the years of peace and quietude is utterly inadequate for present emergencies.

We have no intention in this article to go into the technical details of the case, but to touch, briefly and as intelligibly as possible, on our position of defence as it is, and the means that seem most fitting to be adopted in order to ensure ourselves a *greater sense of security in the face of present contingencies*. The momentous question is being ventilated incessantly in the columns of the daily journals. Men of all classes, who have, or think they have, a suggestion to offer for the public good, hasten forward with their advice. Country clergymen, Indian majors on half-pay, competition wallahs, and, last but not least, old Cabinet ministers are infected with the public apprehension; and each and all lend their words of wisdom towards the solution of the all-important problem. Speaking

of Cabinet ministers, we find Lord Russell—who, whatever he may be as a good politician, is at least a true Englishman—writing two long and exhaustive letters to the *Times* on our national defences. Thirty years ago, the ex-Prime Minister was certified, by a reviewer of the period, as ready to take the command of the Channel fleet at a moment's notice; and the joke certainly loses none of its pith at the present day, when we find him, in his green old age, gallantly coming forward with propositions for reorganizing the British army.

It is not our purpose, however, to enter into those mysteries of our military system which our would-be authorities so delight to fathom. There are certain broad and unmistakable facts which brook no denial and no palliation.

An utter want of organization is the first and most palpable fact. The military forces of the Crown are a "heterogeneous medley." There is no cohesion, no unity. The three chief branches of our national forces are—the regular army, the army reserve, and the militia, volunteers, and yeomanry; and each of these is under a separate authority. The regular army is under the Commander-in-Chief; the pensioners and army reserve under the War Office; and the militia, volunteers, and yeomanry, under the lords-lieutenant of counties. The laws which govern these several forces are contained in various acts of Parliament, which it would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to get together; and the regulations concerning pay, promotion, and discipline are contained partly in scattered regulations, partly in an unwritten code known only to officials at the War Office and Horse Guards, by whom the law is laid down in these matters without fear of appeal, as nobody else can understand it.

The regular army, the militia, and the volunteers, are severally recruited by voluntary enlistment; but, instead of mutually helping one another, a competition—we might almost say jealousy—exists between them which is hardly conducive to united action. There are, for instance, three different systems for appointing officers. In the scientific corps—namely, the engineers and artillery—officers are appointed by open competition of the severest kind. In the guards, infantry and cavalry, they are nominated by the Commander-in-Chief; and promotion goes *sometimes* by seniority, but principally by purchase. In the militia and vo-

lunteers, commissions issue from the lords-lieutenant.

Our army has cost us, during the last ten years, nearly a hundred and fifty millions of money. About eighteen millions has been expended upon equipment and stores, and yet our sea defences are not armed with guns capable of piercing armour-clad ships; even our regular troops are not yet wholly armed with the breech-loader; and we are positively short of powder. In fact, if we drifted into war to-morrow, and lost a force but one-tenth in number of that French force now prisoners in Germany, we should not know where to turn for reserves. We have men, material, money, public spirit in abundance. We have in India, indeed, an army of 180,000 men, perfectly equipped for war. Yet, on the shores of the Channel, scarcely four divisions could be drawn up in order of battle. John Bull may well feel nervous, when such awkward truths as these force themselves upon his notice. And to this state our military power in Europe has been reduced by the absence of one thing—organization.

Our space will not permit us to go fully into the causes which have led to the present deplorable state of things; but we must perforce touch upon them to some slight degree.

The defence of the realm is the first duty of the Crown; but the Crown cannot legally keep up an army without the consent of Parliament, and the army is governed by the Crown through the power given to it by Parliament in the annual passing of the Mutiny Act. The constitutional principle which followed upon the revolution of 1688 was, that Parliament should vote the supplies; but the dealing with those supplies rested with the Crown. The amounts annually voted, Parliament could easily control; but long wars and the protection of distant colonies gave rise to what were called "army extraordinaries," which were subsequent votes of money called for by the Crown to meet unforeseen expenses. These "army extraordinaries" were used by the Crown as a constant pretext for exceeding the supply, and the confusion necessary upon them was a complete obstacle to real control over military expenditure. The Reformed Parliament of 1835 determined to take matters more into their own hands, and abolished army extraordinaries; and an agitation for army reform has been going on ever since,

the results of which have been to throw various departments together under one head, but without reconstructing them on any clear and definite principle. Consequently, ever since the consolidation of the War Office, duties have clashed, power has been wasted, and extravagance has run riot through the whole system.

The same absence of system in the arrangements made at the union of the departments, which has given us the two conflicting governments at the War Office and Horse Guards, has infected the whole of our army system, and has left us without any really effective reserves at the back of our standing army.

It were worse than useless, however, to waste time in deploring the errors of the past. The only thing that remains, in the face of the emergency, is to set our house in order as soon and as effectively as possible; and the great question that now vexes men's minds is how this can be done.

Suggestions manifold have been made, and by competent authorities. Lord Elcho has for years past urged upon successive Governments the adoption of broad principles of defensive policy, without trenching too severely upon those civil rights of which Englishmen are so justly jealous. People are rapidly coming round to the conclusion, however, that we shall be forced to recur to a compulsory enrolment or conscription for the militia affecting every man in the country between certain ages. We say "recur," for although this proposition will undoubtedly raise a storm of resistance amongst certain classes, it must be remembered that this is the ancient constitutional law of the realm. The ballot is the true basis on which the militia rests in all the acts of Parliament passed from 1757 to the present time; and its operation is only suspended by an annual act passed regularly since 1829. Hence, it has been so long and so frequently suspended, that many forget or are ignorant of the fact that it is still, at the present moment, the law of the land. It is proposed, then, that this act should no longer be suspended; and that the ballot should be applied to all ranks of society—and that no exemptions, save such necessary and judicious ones as existed under the old Ballot Act, should be allowed to a greater extent than possible. The force raised, in the first instance, would include adults between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five,

and subsequently those between the ages of seventeen and twenty, so as to interfere least with settled trades, professions, or occupations. Compulsory service by ballot has this great virtue, that it brings young men of all classes into the ranks of the militia. The only exemption would be that those who objected to enter the paid militia must serve, at their own expense, in a volunteer corps. But the volunteer service would then be reconstructed, on a severer and more regular system than it has hitherto possessed.

The strength of the militia should be largely increased, and the men enrolled might remain on the rolls for seven years, during the first three of which they would be required to attend the yearly musters; and, for the remaining four, they would be liable to be called out in cases of national emergency. Thus the national reserve would consist of two classes—the first to be trained yearly; the second, having undergone training, to be liable to be called out when the nation is in danger. It has been computed that by this means we might easily raise a permanent standing militia of 300,000 men. The command of the reserve forces would, like that of the army, be under the Commander-in-Chief, who would provide officers under the direction of the Secretary of State; thus taking the old privilege of appointing officers out of the hands of the lords-lieutenant of counties. The militia battalions would, as at present, remain in the counties, which would become the local centres of military action and organization. Officers who, having left the army, were willing to serve in the militia of their own counties, would be far superior to the present race of militia officers, who are for the most part well-to-do country gentlemen whose knowledge of the art of war is decidedly limited. By this means, the militia would be as well officered as the line itself. The new force would serve—like the old one of the same name, but in a far greater degree—as a recruiting ground for the line. It is proposed, also, to modify the army reserve system to a large extent. The option now given of enlistment would be abolished, and a man would be required to serve six years in the army and six in the army reserve, or for other periods at the discretion of the Secretary of State, according to the act. The necessary hold over the men would be retained by giving

them a pension, increasing as they advanced in life and years of service.

A minor, though far from unimportant, question with regard to the army proper has been discussed—namely, whether the present age at which recruits are enlisted is not too young. The great majority of recruits are about eighteen when they enlist. Now, lads of that age are, as a rule, totally unfit to be sent out to India or other hot climates; and the consequence is that hundreds who, if they had gone at twenty-one, would have made veteran soldiers, die out there, or have to be invalided home at great expense. It is considered, therefore, that recruits from the militia for the line should not be less than twenty-one years of age.

One of the most necessary reforms, however, in the reorganization of our new army, is the abolition of the purchase system. The system may even now be said to be doomed. The British army of the future can have nothing to do with an evil which has already wrought so much injury, and been the source of so much inefficiency. The same principle should be maintained in the military service of this country as is in force in the Royal navy, and to a certain extent even in the Indian army—viz., one of selection. Really good and valuable officers would thus always be secured; and we should at least be free from the sneer of Continental critics, that English soldiers in the field are lions led by asses. As regards promotion from the ranks, that is a question on which there is much difference of opinion. Many think that the population of this country is not sufficiently educated for so sweeping an innovation just yet. We all know the favourite saying of the First Napoleon, "that every conscript carried a marshal's bâton in his knapsack;" and the fact has been adduced as proving the superiority of the French officers over our own. But we are not a purely military nation, and we have no wish to be so. All that we want is a good, well-disciplined, well-equipped, and well-officered army, ready for any emergency, home or foreign; and, among the class of educated society from which we now draw our officers, there is plenty of first-rate material, if we choose to bestow commissions, not on the principle of back-door influence and family connections, but with regard to merit alone. The Prussian officers—who have at least shown themselves in no way inferior to the French commanders in the present cam-

paign—are appointed, not from the ranks, but from the exclusive pale of the aristocracy; although they undergo a preliminary training precisely the same as that of a common soldier; and, in fact, go through all the ordinary toil and drudgery which usually belong to the private.

There are many other points which we might advert to with regard to the forthcoming reform in our army administration; but we must not forget that one of the most important features in the organization of any army lies in the department of supply. In this matter, the British army has long been notoriously deficient. The Crimean War furnished us a lesson in this respect which it will take the English nation long to let fall into oblivion. Brave veterans died in the trenches by hundreds, through the want of proper organization in this department alone; and more perished, comparatively speaking, from hunger and consequent disease than from the shells or bullets of the enemy. Nothing is more remarkable in the despatches of the Duke of Wellington, both in India and Spain—as well as in those of Napoleon—than the consummate knowledge and minute attention displayed by those great generals in all that related to the food, transport, and clothing of their armies. These are the first conditions of success in war, and a good general must never lose sight of them.

Another weak point in our armour is our artillery service. The nominal strength of our artillery at this moment is 30 batteries, or 180 guns. Now, the first requisite is the latest artillery and plenty of it. We have no such thing. Our guns are none of the newest, and we have not one-fourth of the number required. The gun last approved at Woolwich might bear comparison with any other gun in use; but pieces on that model have not been supplied to the army; and, even for those which we already have, some thousands of men and horses have yet to be provided before they can be considered available.

Moreover, it is now a question whether field guns may not be made of greater power and calibre than formerly. The Prussian guns overwhelmed the French artillery, not merely by their number, but by their weight of shot. The Battle of Sedan was decided entirely by the fire of artillery. The Germans had, in that battle alone, 600 guns; and although the French, according to their own account,

had a number nearly as great, the weight, range, and precision of the German guns established their superiority so effectually, that towards the close of the battle "the French artillery had practically ceased to exist as a protecting arm."

The English have always been behind in the matter of their artillery; and the explanation is that men of influence have always largely preponderated in other branches of the service, where advancement to the highest commands was attainable. Our field artillery has seldom been employed in masses, for the simple reason that we have never had sufficient guns for the purpose. We have occasionally placed together two or three batteries of six guns each; but this is not what is meant by massing field artillery. The First Napoleon—a consummate master of artillery—was the author of the system of massing it so as to concentrate its fire; although Marlborough advanced, at Malplaquet, forty guns in line at a trot—probably the greatest number ever ordered to the front for co-operation by a British general. But the gigantic efforts at Wagram, Friedland, Borodino, and Leipsic, first really exemplified the system on a grand scale; and, in the present war, the Prussian generals have acted upon the lesson to some purpose. The supreme importance of artillery to an army has never been more effectually proved than by the results of the recent battles. The war may almost be said to have been decided by artillery alone. The idea is not taught in our service—probably, because we never had guns to mass; but the general who can mass them, and will do so before the enemy has time to mass his artillery, is almost sure to win the battle. Artillery, in fact, is of greater importance than infantry; and a small army, like our own, should be especially strong in this arm. Our insular position, too, suggests the same conclusion. An invader might be naturally expected to be weak in artillery, while we, on the other hand, might be overpoweringly strong. Instead of having field artillery for 60,000 men, we ought to have sufficient for at least double and treble that number. We have the means and the material for rendering the British artillery the best in the world, and we should lose no time in accomplishing so vital a work. The history of the hour is teaching a stern lesson, which it behoves us to profit by in time.

In the few remarks we have made, we

have not pretended to deal at length with a subject which is so vast and comprehensive as the proper management of the army of the most powerful nation in the world. But the question has suddenly become one of such immediate interest to all of us, that it is impossible to pass it by in silence, even in the columns of a literary magazine like this. It will engage the attention of Parliament in the session about to open, with an interest which has never been called forth for many a long year. Irish finances, popular education, and many other equally important subjects, must be content to remain in the shade for the nonce. This involves the very name and existence of England as a great nation. It involves the safety of the country from foreign invasion. Upon it, in fact, depend the preservation of our very liberties and the time-honoured belief in the inviolability of an Englishman's hearth and home.

